

# A Conversation with Rose Issa, Champion of Artists From the Middle East

On the eve of her exhibition at the new Middle East Institute Gallery, Issa talks about her decades-long curatorial career, the shifting infrastructure for artists in the region, and the need for memory and archives.

[Lizzy Vartanian Collier](#) September 11, 2019



Batoul Shimi, "Arab World Under Pressure" (2012), aluminum pressure cooker (courtesy of the artist and Rose Issa Projects)

In 1982, Rose Issa curated the first Arab film festival in Paris, moving to

London shortly after to launch the Kufa gallery, funded by the famed Iraqi architect Dr. Mohamed Makiya. She is credited with introducing Middle Eastern art and artists — including Ayman Baalbaki, [Monir Farmanfarmaian](#), Farhad Moshiri and [Abbas Kiarostami](#) — to Western audiences for the first time.

In addition to organizing exhibitions in London, Issa has curated globally in public and private institutions including the Victoria & Albert Museum, the European Parliament, and the Hermitage Museum. She also consults for public and private institutions, and has published comprehensive monographs and catalogues addressing contemporary visual arts from the Arab world and Iran.

Most recently, Issa organized the exhibition *Arabicity/Ourouba* — the inaugural show for the new [MEI Gallery at the Middle East Institute](#) in Washington, D.C. — which focuses on two decades of contemporary art from the Arab world. Hyperallergic spoke with her about her career, the art market, publishing, and her new exhibition.

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**Hyperallergic:** *I remember when we first met; you said you were a journalist first...*

**Rose Issa:** First yes, I graduated from the American University of Beirut in Mathematics, can you believe it? One day when I was walking on Hamra Street in Beirut I discovered Iranian Radio Television. I went upstairs — I was born in Iran — I was very curious and the director told me they had just opened this office for the Middle East and asked if I'd like to work there. I hadn't studied journalism, but they said since I could read and speak several languages, I could manage it. I laughed and left. A few months later, [the 1973 war](#) was starting, I went to read the telexes and the news and Safa Haeri, the director asked me to translate for him. I ended up working there for three years. It allowed me to meet many leaders, like

King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, whom I admired, in the region and it was a wonderful experience.

Rose Issa (photo by Sueraya Shaheen)

**H:** *So how did you make the transition into art?*

**RI:** The transition came when I left Beirut for Paris because of the civil war. I went to France and in order to be able to reside there I studied at École des Langues Orientales [now the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales] and then I went to the Sorbonne to do a Master's degree. When I did that in 1982 the war happened in Lebanon, Israel invaded, and I couldn't go back to see my parents. So I said, what can I do? My parents were very much into film in Lebanon. We went many times a week to see films; it was the only entertainment in Beirut. The cinemas were very good, and luxurious, the films were well selected in the original languages. So I was very sharp in film. There were galleries, but very few. I called on my filmmaker friends and I said "I want to do a festival but I'm stuck in Paris, will you lend me the films?" They agreed, *Occupation Resistance* was my first festival in 1982 [in] Paris and that was the first

Arab festival. I had to hire a movie theatre — one in Saint Germain said it would cost 10,000 francs, so I went to the first Arab embassy, the Libyan one, and I got the funding. It was extremely successful, queues everywhere, everyone was coming to film the first Arab film festival.

This first festival showed me that nobody was doing any cultural events outside the Arab world to reflect their own image. The word curator is a new word, it didn't exist in 1982. There was a need for somebody to do cultural events. Cannes Festival called me and said that they called Arab filmmakers but they don't answer. They asked me to help, so I did for three years and then I came to London to help open the Kufa Gallery [a former gallery on London's Westbourne Grove]. Nobody was doing it and I felt obliged to do it. Edward Saïd told me: "Just do it. And if somebody can do better than you, let them do better than you. Meanwhile, nobody is doing it, go ahead, do."

Now everybody can discover films and the filmmakers on the net; I'm less needed in that field, that's why I'm doing publications. It's not something others can do — I know every single artist in any of my books. If I don't do it, there won't be a trace of our collaborations. Archives are needed. Memory is needed.

**H:** *And how do you think attitudes towards Middle Eastern art have changed over the last couple of decades?*

**RI:** Before it was semi-ignored; there were very few individuals like me doing it. Then when the market picked up with the first auction of Christie's in Dubai in 2006 and Sotheby's in London, the market picked up and the prices went up, galleries were interested and then Art Dubai happened. I was very supportive initially of Art Dubai, but with all the money they made there is not a single museum in UAE focusing on the interests of the Arab world. In 22 Arab countries we don't have one decent museum to whom a collector or an artist can give artworks or books. The new institutions do not have the staff that can preserve their legacy. It is

individuals who make an impact. Everybody does their bit, but we cannot count on institutions or sponsors yet.

Raeda Saadeh, "Penelope" (2010), digital print, variable size (courtesy of the artist and Rose Issa Projects)

**H:** *So your artworks, are they gifted?*

**RI:** No I bought everything. I'm the first buyer of all my artists.

**H:** *And you keep in contact with them all the time?*

**RI:** Yes of course, as I want to write about and do exhibitions with them. In the last five years everyone wants to invest in modern art. I don't work with dead artists — I'm only interested in living artists because they have something to say and I want you to get it from the mouth of the artist. In many of my books, it took me 10 times as long to write so they would answer my questions in their words.

**H:** *Do you think it's important for Middle Eastern artists to have a presence in the West?*

**RI:** It's important for them to have a presence everywhere — in China, in Africa, in America — as much as in the Arab world.

**H:** *Why did you decide to close your gallery?*

**RI:** I didn't decide, the owner of the block decided to revamp the whole block and thought the Chinese market would be a better prospect. By the time it was finished, China was less interested in investing in [the] UK, then the new rent doubled, which is ridiculous, as most venues are closing down. The idea of a gallery is finished — people are only going to art fairs, and soon they will stop going there, because there are so many. The world is saturated and we have to find new ways. Collectors want to invest. They want to know the value of a work? They should go to artnet and see. I invest in [art] myself. I invest in my eyes, in my heart. If I like an artist, I buy. You can do the same thing. For me the future is archiving, recording, publishing, because I want to keep a record. Even if nobody buys the books, at least they are there.

Chant Avedissian, "Mrs Souad Labib," from the "Icons of the Nile" series (1991–2004), pigment and gum arabic on recycled cardboard, 50 x 70 cm

(courtesy of the artist, Rose Issa Projects, and a private collection, London)

**H:** *How did you choose the work for your show at the MEI Gallery?*

**RI:** This is the first time that the Middle East Institute has opened a gallery, so it has to reflect Middle Eastern concerns of the last ten to twenty years. People say "Arab Spring", but really it's Arab uprising, and often it was orchestrated ... and how others manipulated us — the wars are economic wars only.

This is the first exhibition. I don't know how they will manage in the future. What I can tell them is that each artist that I am presenting [with] them [including Ayman Baalbaki, Hassan Hajjaj and Chant Avedissian] deserves a solo show there, and deserves [to have] museums to acquire [their work]. If it's an opportunity for museums to wake up, that's very good for us and for them — [for] a global, more balanced world.

It's the voice of anti-war, that's what I'd like to say; despite all the images that you see, the real aesthetic is [that]. I know artists never want to be ambassadors, but for me the cultural ambassador — the real image of the country — is reflected in our films, in our artworks, and in our literature. The rest comes and goes. As Chant [Avedissian] says "كل هل يزول" (kul hal yazul) — nothing is permanent. It's about the impermanence of things. You can be young one day, the next years you will not be. You may be rich one day, but nothing guarantees you will remain rich, or poor. You may be sick one day, but this too will not last. It's positive, philosophical and it's also humble. It humanizes people. Use it.

[Arabicity|Ourouba](#) opens at the MEI Gallery on September 14 and will remain on view through November 23. The exhibition is curated by Rose Issa.